

Ten Concepts of a Healthy Marriage

The following article by Dr. Harley describes the Basic Concepts he uses during marital counseling.

You have just been introduced to all the Basic Concepts that I use whenever I try to save a marriage. If you apply them all to your marriage, you will do what most couples want to do, but have failed to do -- fall in love and stay in love. And that's what ultimately saves marriage -- restoring the feeling of love.

Of course, it takes much more than just the feeling of love to build a successful marriage. It takes your willingness and ability to care for and protect each other. But that feeling of incredible attraction is the best litmus test of your success in giving each other the care and protection that you need. If you are both in love, your Takers are convinced that the relationship is a good deal for both of you, and will not interfere with what's going on. Your Givers have free reign to provide each other the best of what you both have to offer.

When you are in love, your emotions help you meet each other's emotional needs. They provide instincts that you may not have even known you have -- instincts to be affectionate, sexual, conversational, recreational, honest and admiring. These all seem to come naturally when you are in love.

But when you fall out of love, everything that will help your marriage seems unnatural. Your instincts turn against marital recovery, and toward divorce. That's why I've created these Basic Concepts -- to help you do what it takes to restore your love for each other when you are not in love, when you don't feel like doing any of them. And then once your love is restored, these concepts will help you stay in love for the rest of your lives.

I present my summary of basic concepts in a slightly different order than they were first presented to you. When they are presented briefly, they're a little more logical when presented this way.

Basic Concept #1: The Love Bank

In my struggle to learn how to save marriages, I eventually discovered that the best way to do it was to teach couples how to fall in love with each other -- and stay in love. So I created a concept that I called the Love Bank to help couples understand how people fall in and out of love. This concept, perhaps more than any other that I created, helped couples realize that almost everything they did affected their love for each other either positively or negatively. And that awareness set most of them on a course of action that preserved their love and saved their marriages.

Within each of us is a Love Bank that keeps track of the way each person treats us. Everyone we know has an account and the things they do either deposit or withdraw love units from their accounts. It's your emotions' way of encouraging you to be with those who make you happy. ~~When you associate someone with good feelings, deposits are made into that person's account in your Love Bank. And when the Love Bank~~ reaches a certain level of deposits (the romantic love threshold), the feeling of love is triggered. As long as your Love Bank balance remains above that threshold, you will experience the feeling of love. But when it falls below that threshold, you will lose that feeling. You will like anyone with a balance above zero, but you will only be in love with someone whose balance is above the love threshold.

However, your emotions do not simply encourage you to be with those who make you happy -- they also discourage you from being with those who make you unhappy. Whenever you associate someone with bad feelings, withdrawals are made in your Love Bank. And if you withdraw more than you deposit, your Love Bank balance can fall below zero. When that happens the Love Bank turns into the Hate Bank. You will dislike those with moderate negative balances, but if the balance falls below the hate threshold, you will hate the person.

Try living with a spouse you hate! Your emotions are doing everything they can to get you out of there -- and divorce is one of the most logical ways to escape.

Couples usually ask for my advice when they are just about ready to throw in the towel. Their Love Banks have been losing love units so long that they are now deeply in the red. And their negative Love Bank accounts make them feel uncomfortable just being in the same room with each other. They cannot imagine surviving marriage for another year, let alone ever being in love again.

But that's my job -- to help them fall in love with each other again. I encourage them to stop making Love Bank withdrawals, and start making Love Bank deposits. I created all of the remaining Basic Concepts to help couples achieve those objectives.

Basic Concept #2: Instincts and Habits

Instincts are behavioral patterns that we are born with, and habits are patterns that we learn. Both of them tend to be repeated again and again almost effortlessly. They are important in our discussion of what it takes to be in love because it's our behavior that makes deposits and withdrawals from Love Banks, and our instincts and habits make up most of our behavior.

Instincts and habits can make Love Bank deposits, so it is imperative to know how to create those habits because once they are learned, deposits are made repeatedly and almost effortlessly.

Unfortunately, many of our instincts and habits, such as angry outbursts, contribute to Love Bank withdrawals. Since they are repeated so often, they play a very important role in the annihilation of Love Bank accounts. If we are to stop Love Bank withdrawals, we must somehow stop destructive instincts and habits in their tracks. Instincts are harder to stop than habits, but they can both be avoided.

As we discuss the remaining concepts, keep in mind the value of a good habit, and the harm of a bad habit, because their effect on Love Bank balances are multiplied by repetition.

Basic Concept #3: The Most Important Emotional Needs

What's the fastest way to deposit love units into each other's Love Banks? I interviewed literally hundreds of couples trying to find the answer to this question when I was first learning how to save marriages. Eventually their answer became clear to me -- you must meet each other's most important emotional needs.

You and your spouse fell in love with each other because you made each other very happy, and you made each other happy because you met some of each other's important emotional needs. The only way you and your spouse will stay in love is to keep meeting those needs. Even ~~when the feeling of love begins to fade, or when it's gone entirely, it's not necessarily gone for good. It can be recovered whenever you both go back to making large Love Bank deposits.~~

First, be sure you know what each other's most important emotional needs are (complete the Emotional Needs Questionnaire). Then, learn to meet the needs that are rated the highest in a way that is fulfilling to your spouse, and enjoyable for you, too.

It's likely that you and your spouse do not prioritize your needs in the same order of importance. A highly important need for you may not be as important to your spouse. So you may find yourself trying to meet needs that seem unimportant to you. But your spouse depends on you to meet those needs, and it's the most effective and efficient way for you make large Love Bank deposits.

Basic Concept #4: The Policy of Undivided Attention

Unless you and your spouse schedule time each week for undivided attention, it will be impossible to meet each other's most important emotional needs. So to help you and your spouse clear space in your schedule for each other, I have written the Policy of Undivided Attention:

Give your spouse your undivided attention a minimum of fifteen hours each week, using the time to meet the emotional needs of affection, conversation, recreational companionship and sexual fulfillment.

This policy will help you avoid one of the most common mistakes in marriage -- neglecting each other.

But it goes beyond helping guarantee that you will meet each other's emotional needs. It also unlocks the door to the use of all the other basic concepts. Without time for undivided attention you will not be able to avoid Love Busters and you will not be able to negotiate effectively. Time for undivided attention is the necessary ingredient for everything that's important in marriage.

And yet, as soon as most couples marry, and especially when children arrive, couples usually replace their time together with activities of lesser importance. You probably did the same thing. You tried to meet each other's needs with time "left over," but sadly, there wasn't much time left over. Your lack of private time together may have become a great cause of unhappiness, and yet you felt incapable of preventing it. You may have also found yourself bottling up your honest expression of feelings because there was just no appropriate time to talk.

Make your time to be alone with each other your highest priority -- that way it will never be replaced by activities of lesser value. Your career, your time with your children, maintenance of your home, and a host of other demands will all compete for your time together. But if you follow the Policy of Undivided Attention, you will not let anything steal from those precious and crucial hours together.

It is essential for you to (a) spend time away from children and friends whenever you give each other your undivided attention (you need privacy); (b) use the time to meet the emotional needs of affection, conversation, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment when you are together (when met, these make the largest Love Bank deposit of all!); and (c) schedule at least fifteen hours together each week (that's how long it usually takes to meet the four needs). When you were dating, you gave each other this kind of attention and you fell in love. When people have affairs, they also give each other this kind of attention to keep their love for each other alive. Why should courtship and affairs be the only times love is created? Why can't it happen in marriage as well? It can, if you set aside time every week to give each other undivided attention.

Basic Concept #5: Love Busters

When you meet each other's most important emotional needs, you become each other's source of greatest happiness. But if you are not careful, you can also become each other's source of greatest unhappiness.

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It's pointless to deposit love units if you withdraw them right away. So in addition to meeting important emotional needs, you must be sure to protect your spouse, and the Love Bank, from withdrawals. And paying attention to how your everyday behavior can make each other unhappy does that.

You and your spouse were born to be demanding, disrespectful, angry, annoying, independent and dishonest. These are normal human traits that I call Love Busters because they destroy the feeling of love spouses have for each other. But if you promise to avoid being the cause of your spouse's unhappiness, you will do whatever it takes to overcome these destructive tendencies for your spouse's protection. By eliminating Love Busters, you will not only be protecting your spouse, but you will also be preserving your spouse's love for you.

Basic Concept #6: The Policy of Radical Honesty

If you and your spouse are to be in love with each other, you must give honesty special attention. That's because it plays such an important role in the creation of romantic love. It's one of the ten most important emotional needs, so when it's met, it can trigger the feeling of love. On the other hand, its counterpart, dishonesty, is a Love Buster -- it destroys love.

But there's another reason that honesty is crucial in creating love: Honesty is the only way that you and your spouse will ever come to understand each other. Without honesty, the adjustments that are crucial to making each other happy and avoiding unhappiness cannot be made.

It isn't easy to be honest. Honesty is an unpopular value these days, and most couples have not made this commitment to each other. Many marriage counselors and clergymen argue that honesty is not always the best policy. They believe that it's cruel to disclose past indiscretions and it's selfish to make such disclosures. While it makes you feel better to get a mistake off your chest, it causes your partner to suffer. So, they argue, the truly caring thing to do is to lie about your mistakes or at least keep them tucked away.

And if it's compassionate to lie about sins of the past, why isn't it also compassionate to lie about sins of the present -- or future? To my way of thinking, it's like letting the proverbial camel's nose under the tent. Eventually you will be dining with the camel. Either honesty is always right, or you'll always have an excuse for being dishonest.

To help remind couples how important honesty is in marriage, I have written the Policy of Radical Honesty:

Reveal to your spouse as much information

about yourself as you know; your thoughts,

feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history,

daily activities, and plans for the future

Self-imposed honesty with your spouse is essential to your marriage's safety and success. Honesty will not only bring you closer to each other emotionally, it will also prevent the creation of destructive habits that are kept secret from your partner.

Basic Concept #7: The Giver and Taker

Have you ever thought that your spouse is possessed? One moment he or she is loving and thoughtful, and the next you are faced with selfishness and thoughtlessness. Trust me, it's not a demon you're up against, it's the two sides of our personalities. I call them the Giver and the Taker.

All of us want to make a difference in the lives of other. We want others to be happy, and we want to contribute to their happiness. When we feel that way, our Giver is influencing us. The Giver's rule is do whatever you can to make others happy and avoid anything that makes others unhappy, even if it makes you unhappy. It encourages us to use that rule in our relationships with other people.

But we also want the best for ourselves. We want to be happy, too. When we feel that way, our Taker is influencing us. The Taker's rule is do whatever you can to make yourself happy, and avoid anything that makes yourself unhappy, even if it makes others unhappy. If that rule ever makes sense to you, it's because your Taker is in control.

These two primitive aspects of our personality are usually balanced in our dealings with others. But in marriage they tend to take turns being in charge. And that leads to most of the problems that couples encounter. If we take the advice of our Giver, we are willing to suffer to make our spouse happy, and if we take the advice of our Taker, we are willing to let our spouse suffer to make us happy. In either case the advice we are given is short sighted because someone always gets hurt.

Basic Concept #8: The Three States of Mind in Marriage

The Giver and Taker create moods that I call states of mind. These states of mind have a tremendous influence on the way a husband and wife try to resolve conflicts. But in each of the three states of mind, negotiation is almost impossible. That's what makes negotiation, in general, so tough in marriage.

When we are in love and happy, we are usually in the State of Intimacy. That state of mind is controlled by the Giver, which encourages us to follow the Giver's rule: do whatever you can to make your spouse happy and avoid anything that makes your spouse unhappy, even if it makes you unhappy. That rule can lead to habits that may be good for our spouse, but can be disastrous for us because we are not negotiating with our own interests in mind.

Sadly, flawed agreements made in the state of Intimacy can lead to our own unhappiness, and that in turn wakes the slumbering Taker. As long as we are happy, our Taker has nothing to do, but when we start feeling unhappy, our Taker rises to our rescue and triggers the State of Conflict. With the Taker now in charge, we are encouraged to follow the rule: do whatever you can to make yourself happy, and avoid anything that makes yourself unhappy, even if it makes others unhappy. The Taker also encourages us to be demanding, disrespectful and angry in an effort to force our spouse to make us happy. Fighting is the Taker's favorite "negotiating" strategy.

When fighting doesn't work, and we are still unhappy, the Taker encourages us to take a new course of action that triggers the State of Withdrawal. Instead of trying to force our spouse to make us happy, our Taker wants us to give up on our spouse entirely. We don't want our spouse to do anything for us, and we certainly don't want to do anything for our spouse. In this state of mind we are emotionally divorced.

How can couples work their way back to the state of Intimacy once they find themselves trapped in the state of Withdrawal? And once they are back, how can they stay there? The answers to those questions are found in Basic Concept #9.

Basic Concept #9: The Policy of Joint Agreement

Marital instincts do not lead to fair negotiation. They either lead to giving away the store (State of Intimacy) or robbing the bank (State of Conflict). And in the State of Withdrawal, no one even feels like negotiating. Yet, in order to meet each other's most important needs and avoid Love Busters consistently and effectively, fair negotiation is crucial in marriage.

You need a rule to help you override the shortsighted advice of your Giver and Taker. Their advice is shortsighted because regardless of the rule, someone gets hurt. We get hurt when we follow the Giver's advice and our spouse gets hurt when we follow the Taker's advice. So I've created a rule to guarantee that no one gets hurt, and that's the ultimate goal in fair negotiation. I call this rule the Policy of Joint Agreement:

Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse

Almost everything you do affects each other. So it's very important to know what that effect will be before you actually do it. The Policy of Joint Agreement will help you remember to consult with each other to be sure you avoid being the cause of each other's unhappiness. It also makes negotiation necessary, regardless of your state of mind. If you agree to this policy, you will not be able to do anything without the enthusiastic agreement of the other, so it forces you to discuss your plans, and negotiate with each other's feelings in mind. Without safe and pleasant negotiation, you will simply not be able to reach an enthusiastic agreement.

But there are exceptions to this policy: If the health or safety of a spouse is at risk, it should not be followed. For example, if physical abuse takes place in marriage, it should be reported to authorities by the abused spouse even though the offending spouse would not agree. Exposing infidelity is another example of an exception because the emotional health of a betrayed spouse is at risk by keeping it to him or herself. Some spouses try to use this policy to keep the other spouse from having any normal contact with the outside world. Marriage should provide a safe and healthy environment for both spouses. So if you feel that your health or safety is at risk by following this policy, you should not follow it.

The Policy of Joint Agreement, combined with the Policy of Radical Honesty, helps you create an open and integrated lifestyle, one that will guarantee your love for each other. They also prevent the creation of a secret second life where infidelity, the greatest threat to your marriage, can grow like mold in a damp, dark cellar.

Basic Concept #10: Four Guidelines for Successful Negotiation

If you and your spouse are in conflict about anything, I recommend that you do nothing until you can both agree enthusiastically about a resolution. But how should you go about coming to that agreement? I suggest you follow four essential guidelines.

Guideline 1: Set ground rules to make negotiation pleasant and safe.

Ground rule 1: Try to be pleasant and cheerful throughout negotiations

Ground rule 2: Put safety first. Do not make demands, show disrespect, or become angry when you negotiate, even if your spouse makes demands, shows disrespect or becomes angry with you.

Ground rule 3: If you reach an impasse and you do not seem to be getting anywhere, or if one of you is starting to make demands, show disrespect or become angry, stop negotiating and come back to the issue later.

Guideline 2: Identify the problem from both perspectives with mutual respect for those perspectives.

Guideline 3: Brainstorm with abandon - give your creativity a chance to discover solutions that would make you both happy. Carry a pad and pencil with you to jot down ideas as you think of them throughout the day.

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Guideline 4: Choose the solution that meets the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement best - mutual and enthusiastic agreement. Whenever a conflict arises keep in mind the importance of finding a solution that will deposit as many love units as possible, while avoiding withdrawals. And be sure that the way you find that solution also deposits love units and avoids withdrawals.

Would you like to learn more? Now that you've read a summary of my basic concepts, you may want to learn more about each of them. If so, go back to the beginning to my first, and most important concept that I created that help couples understand the rise and fall of romantic love. I call it the Love Bank.

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